Equal Opportunity Commission
Promoting Equality

EQUALITY ONLINE COLUMN SPECIAL EDITION

When the Light of Divali Becomes a Commitment to Equality

As Trinidad and Tobago celebrated Divali, the Festival of Lights, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar offered a message that extended well beyond the lighting of deyas.

In her national Divali message, the Prime Minister reflected on the ancient words of the Ramcharitmanas: "All people loved one another." She described this as a simple but profound measure of a society's well-being, and reminded us that the deeper meaning of Divali lies in bringing peace, dignity and hope into people's lives.

She went on to say that love of country must mean care for its people, including "opportunity for children, security for families, dignity for elderly citizens, and a voice for every community."

Those words invite us to think about what equality really means.

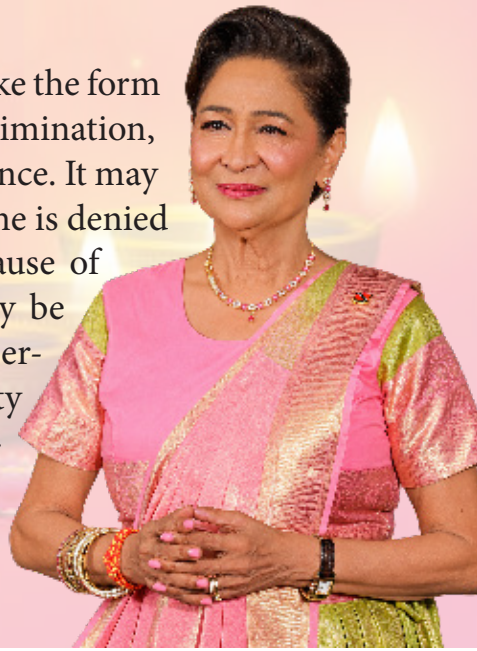
Equality is not simply an ideal that we acknowledge on special occasions. It is something that must be reflected in how people are treated every day, in our workplaces, schools, businesses, communities and public institutions.

This is where the work of the Equal Opportunity Commission becomes particularly relevant.

Established under the Equal Opportunity Act, the EOC has a clear mandate to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and foster good relations among people of different statuses. Its work is grounded in the belief that every person deserves to be treated with dignity and fairness, regardless of their race, ethnicity, origin, religion, sex, marital status or disability.

In many ways, the message of Divali and the work of the EOC meet at the same point: the belief that darkness should not be allowed to define people's lives.

The darkness may take the form of prejudice, discrimination, exclusion or intolerance. It may appear when someone is denied an opportunity because of who they are. It may be experienced by a person with a disability who encounters barriers that prevent full participation.



It may occur when someone's religion, race, sex, origin or marital status becomes the reason they are treated differently.

These experiences remind us that equality cannot remain an abstract principle. It must be lived.

The Prime Minister reinforced this point at the Office of the Prime Minister's Divali celebrations when she called on public officers to serve every community fairly. She said public institutions have a special responsibility to demonstrate the respect and unity that Trinidad and Tobago values, and stressed that public confidence is strengthened when people know they will be treated fairly.

That principle extends across our society.

Whether we are employers, educators, service providers, public officers, community leaders, parents or neighbours, we all have a role to play in creating a society where people feel respected and included.

The Prime Minister also made a powerful statement during the first Divali lighting ceremony outside Parliament. She reminded the nation that Parliament is the home of our democracy, where every citizen's voice must be heard and every community must feel that it belongs. She further told children that their background or financial circumstances should never determine their worth or their opportunities.

That idea of belonging is fundamental to equality.

A person should not have to change who they are in order to be treated fairly. A child should not believe that their future is limited because of where they come from. An employee should not have to endure discrimination to keep a job. A person with a disability should not have to fight simply to access opportunities that others take for granted.

And when discrimination does occur, people should know that they do not have to remain silent.

The EOC provides a place where persons can seek information and assistance about discrimination and equality of opportunity. The Commission investigates complaints, provides public education, conducts advocacy and research, and seeks to resolve disputes through conciliation where appropriate. Its services are provided free of charge.

But the responsibility for equality does not rest with the EOC alone.

The Commission can educate, advocate, investigate and assist, but building a more equal society requires the participation of all of us.

Divali reminds us that even a small light can push back darkness. In the same way, small acts of fairness, kindness and inclusion can make a meaningful difference in someone's life.

Choosing not to tolerate a discriminatory joke. Speaking up when someone is being excluded. Making reasonable efforts to accommodate a person with a disability. Giving someone a fair opportunity. Listening to a different perspective. Treating a person with dignity even when we disagree.

These may appear to be small actions, but collectively they shape the society in which we live.



The light of Divali can remind us of what is possible. It is up to each of us to keep that light burning.



Visit **www.equalopportunity.gov.tt**, email us at **communications@eoc.gov.tt,** or call **1-868-672-0928** to book a free workshop for your organisation, report discrimination or victimisation, or get support. You can also follow us on social media.